



# CLEARING THE WAY

By Ceri Wolf



How space clearing can improve your life

Have you ever looked down on a highway from a tower block and watched the cars streaming past? Or have you ever felt that surge of blood pumping through your veins after exercise? There is a certain freedom and exhilaration to those flowing movements and an infectious vibrancy to moving energy.



Water Tai Chi has become popular in 'the west', where water fitness principles have been combined with the graceful flowing movements of Tai Chi Chuan. Tai Chi has been practised for centuries to open the body's meridians or energy channels. Life force is increased through breathing, balance, agility, coordination, grace, posture, mind focus, relaxation, endurance and flexibility while regular practice is advocated to keep our body "in balance" physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually.

The mind-body concepts of this ancient art, combined with gentle water, attract people looking for alternative ways to de-stress and bring balance to their lives. "People these days are drawn to enjoyable, non-mainstream ways to enhance health and lifestyle. At the same time, they are receptive to fun and intriguing challenges," says Allan Ng, PR manager of Earth Sanctuary in Singapore. The spa has recently introduced Water Tai Chi. Moreover, sufferers of modern-day physical ailments like back pain and arthritis have also found Water Tai Chi beneficial. According to Jennifer Bell, a Missouri water instructor, water is a great equalizer for people. "If you have any kind of a physical challenge, the water will help because it displaces 85 percent of your weight. So it's a lot easier for people because they don't have to support their whole weight."

Water, some experts say, offers a great atmosphere to work abdominal and back muscles essential for back support. Water buoyancy relieves gravitational pressure and pain on the back, while water turbulence forces you to use core muscles to stay balanced. Still, the ease of a water workout can be deceiving, Mr Bell says. But the benefits are there. Stubhan Clark, a certified athletic trainer now based in Philadelphia extols the benefits of water. "Water is very soothing, warm and comfortable. When a person is injured, it changes the patterns of movement. In water, a person can relearn the body's natural balance." Her background is in rehabilitating injured athletes using water-based exercise. Now however she's using her work to benefit non-athletes. "By repeating a particular

segment of a Tai Chi movement and using qigong breathing exercises, Clark has created a series of underwater fluid motions to address flexibility, balance and stretching elements of physical exercise that are often overlooked.

"Very often, there are some people out there whom you would consider fit who are missing balance and flexibility," she says. "A very inflexible hamstring, for example, can lead to back injuries."

Thus, the goal of her Water Tai Chi class is to help her students achieve natural balance. "It's not only the balance between left and right, but the upper and lower body, and 'mental balance'" she points out. Apparently, athletes get a kick out of it too. From a trainer's point of view, water is the perfect workout setting for both beginners and veterans. Training in water meets the five components of physical fitness: cardiovascular and muscle endurance, muscular strength, flexibility and body composition - the ratio of lean to non-lean tissue."

Certified athletic trainer Bill Ingemi adds a cautionary note: land gravity causes bones to respond, so a land workout is best for people who want to promote bone density and strength - if they can tolerate gravity. "(Gravity is) one of the primary forces the body has to resist, and that enhances dry-land activities," says Ingemi. But bones will also respond to muscle contractions during water exercise, he says. "When muscle pulls on bone to move the bone, the bone gets stressed from the muscle contraction, and that's great."

Still, for the lot of us who are less athletic, a worthy incentive for working in water amounts to a 30-minute walk on land, which burns an average of 135 calories. A 30-minute walk in chest-high water burns an average of 264 calories, says Allison Worley, aquatics coordinator at CoHealth system's Meyer Center in Springfield, Montana. Exercisers get 12 times the resistance just walking through the water, some experts claim. Wonder what Bruce would have said to these hybrid workouts? He would have plunged into them completely, I'm sure.

#### MORE FACTS:

Introduce Tai Chi movements only after thoroughly warming up the body. Cooling can occur quickly with slow movements in typical pool temperatures of 80 to 84 degrees F resulting in chilled, uncomfortable participants. Adding power and speed to the movements or alternating between faster and slower movements can help maintain comfort. Therapy pools with temperatures near 90 degrees favour relaxation and are ideal for water tai chi.

Tai Chi footwork, including the pivot twist step, side step, and turn back and kick are easier and safer to execute with shoes on. Aquatic shoes improve traction, support and footing, and protect the bottom of the feet. Movements are executed with knees slightly bent, and one or both feet grounded while maintaining a low centre of gravity. The objective is to overcome the effects of buoyancy and to remain grounded.†

Other benefits of practicing Tai Chi in the water:

- Water is a natural healer, and when exercising in water (with one's rib cage submerged), heart rates remain lower than they do with comparable land exercises. This is because water cools the body with less effort than air, creating less work for the heart.
- Water also reduces the effects of gravity on the body, thus blood flows from below the heart back up with less effort, making it easier and safer for overweight people to exercise.
- Natural compression from the water on all body systems also makes exercising easier on the vascular or circulation system, causing a smaller load to the heart, as the blood is more evenly distributed throughout the body.
- More efficient oxygen transfer to blood, as exercising in water is easier on the heart.
- A person always works two muscle groups at the same time in water exercises. For example, in Water Tai Chi, there is an exercise called 'arm circles', which specifically targets the biceps and triceps simultaneously. This is impossible to recreate on land due to gravity.†

† CITIZEN-TIMES.com April 12, 2004 | † Brandon Herald, August 22, 2003

‡ CITIZEN-TIMES.com April 12, 2004 | † American Fitness, July-August, 1998

† Spa Sonesta Beach Resort Key Biscayne